DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 030 PS 010 516

AUTHOR Newberger, Carolyn Moore
TITLE Child Abuse and the Development of a Parental Consciousness.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (San Francisco, California, March 15-18, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Development; *Child Abuse; Child Rearing; Clinical Psychology; *Developmental Stages; Interaction Process Analysis; Interpersonal Competence; Intervention; Interviews; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Counseling; Parent Responsibility; *Parent Role; Parents; *Perspective Taking; Research

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a clinical-developmental discussion of eight parents with a history of having abused a child and outlines a larger developmental analysis of parental conceptions about children and child rearing which was validated on a broad cross-section of 55 parents. From logical analysis and empirical interview data, four developmental levels of parental reasoning, which describe an increasingly conceptually adequate understanding of children and the parental role, were identified. The four levels were Egoistic Orientation, Conventional Orientation, Subjective-Individualistic Orientation, and Process or Interactional Orientation. As a group, the eight parents studied expressed significantly lower mean levels of parental reasoning than matched controls. These findings are reviewed in the light of recent advances in clinical approaches to child abuse. The clinical utility of developmental and conceptual approaches to parental functioning is discussed. Parental consciousness and stress factors are reviewed in order to identify interactions which appear to weaken or to protect the parent-child bond. A developmental analysis is said to allow sources of competence and strength as well as sources of vulnerability to be identified. It is noted that consideration of the interactions among the several factors which may influence parenting permits increasingly precise discriminations of how and for whom certain circumstances and characteristics are implicated in seriously troubled parent-child relationships. (Author/MP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED170030

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Child Abuse and the Development of a Parental Consciousness

Carolyn Moore Newberger, Ed.D.

Judge Baker Guidance Center
and
Harvard Medical School

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carolyn Moore Newberger

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

PS 010516

Paper presented at the 1979 Biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, San Francisco, California

During the past several years, I have been investigating parents' conceptions of children and of the nature and responsibilities of the parental role, and have identified and defined developmental levels of parental consciousness. In this paper, I will briefly describe this research, and will present a substudy which indicates that parental consciousness may be implicated in the etiology of child abuse. This evidence derives from a controlled study of eight parents with a history of child abuse, in which parental conceptions were measured simultaneously with familial and environmental factors in order to identify interactions which appear to weaken or to protect the parent-child relationship.[1,2,3]

The study of a parental consciousness builds from moral and social-cognitive developmental theory and methods, as well as from clinical experience with parents, some of whom have abused their children. While talking with parents about their children and their roles as parents, I was struck by the inability of some parents to consider their children's perspectives. Descriptions of different stages in the development of children's understanding of other's perspectives and of rights and responsibilities in interpersonal relationships, as they have been described by cognitive-developmental investigators,[4,5,6] also seemed to characterize stable individual differences in how parents think about their children and about parental responsibilities. These parents' awareness of their children as people and of their role as parents seemed to be connected to how they behaved as parents.

The problems of practice associated with the present theory base are many.[7,8] Although in clinical case discussions, parental conceptions are frequently noted and discussed, the present theory base does not offer an organized or systematic framework for their analysis, but rather offers static notions of parental functioning contained in such formulations as "role reversal"[9] and "distorted expec-

tations of children."[10]

This prompted a consideration of the theoretical and practical utility of an approach to parental functioning based on cognitive-developmental theory, where the emphasis is not on static labels, but on defining the developmental path from immature to mature conceptions of children and the parental role. This approach to clinical functioning would identify levels of adequacy of processes universal to parents, rather than the more discrete indicators which are labeled "normal" or "pathological." With a competence-based model, "normal" and "troubled" parent -child relationships can be compared along the same dimensions, and sources of strength can be identified as well as sources of vulnerability. Parental development can be assessed and characterized, not simply symptom reduction and behavior change.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical basis for this research derives from studies by Piaget and his followers of developmental stages and changes in children's understanding of the physical and social world. Piaget describes how children construct mental maps for understanding the world which they experience.[11] At each stage of development, the mental map is reorganized so that the world is understood in a more flexible, comprehensive, and accurate way. This mental map serves in cognitive-developmental theory as a blueprint for the child's understanding of the world around him or her, and for guiding his or her actions in respect to people and objects.

A sequence of developmental stages has been discovered by Piaget, Kohlberg, and other investigators of the development of social concepts in children's thinking about many aspects of the social world, such as conceptions of social and occupational roles,[12] of the nature of friendships,[13] and of peer group relation-

ships. These stages not only define a developmental sequence; they also describe differences in people's understanding of others both during childhood and in adulthood. Through these research efforts, a picture of the developmental progression and of individual differences in awareness of the social world in different relationship contexts is being constructed. A common thread in these studies is that at successive stages of social awareness, thinking moves from a focus exlusively on the self, to an awareness of others in a categorical and stereotyped way, to an awareness of others as idiosyncratic individuals with individual psychological complexities.

I hypothesized that a structural sequence of social perspective-taking is implicit in all interpersonal relationships, including adult relationships. In other words, in any relationship domain, one could discover a sequence of stages of understanding of persons and roles in that relationship; that different individuals would reason at different levels of understanding; and that if individuals were followed over time, change would be in the direction of more mature levels of understanding.

I pursued this idea in the parental domain, not only to extend the boundaries of social-developmental theory, but also to provide an analytic framework for the study of strength and vulnerability in the parent-child relationship.

Method

Fifty-five parents from a broad cross-section of social and family backgrounds were interviewed. From an analysis of their reasoning about issues concerning children and child-rearing, a theoretical measure was constructed which describes stages of parental awareness of children, the parent-child relationship, and the parental role.

Interview

The interview presents both direct questions and hypothetical dilemmas concerning a parent's view of the child, of parents' and children's rights and responsibilities in home and in society, and the meaning and management of these universal issues of child rearing:

meeting needs

maintaining trust and communication

guiding behavior and discipline, and

resolving conflict.

Theoretical Measure

From the interview data, a hierarchy of four increasingly comprehensive and psychologically oriented levels of parental awareness was discerned and described:

Level 1: Egoistic Orientation: The parent understands the child as a projection of his or her own experience, and the parental role is organized around parental wants and needs.

Level 2: Conventional Orientation: The child is understood in terms of externally derived (tradition, culture, "authority"), definitions and explanations of children. The parental role is organized around socially-defined notions of correct practices and responsibilities.

Level 3: Subjective-Individualistic Orientation: The child is viewed as a unique individual who is understood through the parent-child relationship, rather than by external definitions of

children. The parental role is organized around identifying and meeting the needs of this child, rather than as the fulfillment of pre-determined role obligations.

Level 4: Process or Interactional Orientation: The parent understands the child as a complex and changing psychological self system. The parent grows in the role, as well as the child, and recognizes that the relationship and the role is built not only on meeting the child's needs, but also on finding ways of balancing one's own needs and the child's so that each can be responsibly met.

A scoring manual was developed which assigns level criteria for each issue treated in the interview. Each response is given a numerical score. These scores are subsequently collapsed into a cumulative level estimate for each respondent. In order to provide a sense of what parental reasoning is like, examples from the manual follow for the issue of discipline and authority:

Level 1: Egoistic Parental Conceptions: What works - Methods are chosen because they are successful in changing behavior the parents find undesirable. The criterion for success is elimination of the behavior, not change in the child.

WHAT DO YOU RELY ON MOST TO GET YOUR CHILDREN TO MIND YOU?

Threatening them with a spoon. I have one of those spoons with the little holes, to strain peas and things, so I take that and I say if you don't be good, I am going to beat you with it. And they usually behave when they see it. I don't use it, but when they see it they usually behave.

HOW DOES THAT SEEM TO WORK?

They do mind, up to a certain point, and then they say, mommy is not going to spank me, so I will start all over again.

WHY DO YOU USE THAT METHOD?

It seems to be about the only method that works.

DO YOU THINK IT IS THE BEST WAY?

Well, no, but I don't know of any other way that works as well.

Level 2: Conventional Parental Conceptions: Explanation and Internalization - As the reason for discipline and authority at Level 2 is not just to change behavior, but to instill standards and values which will guide the child's action in the future, the child's understanding of the reasons for punishment are considered central. The parent explains why what the child is doing is wrong, in order to ensure the inclusion of the parent's standards into the child's developing value system.

WHAT DO YOU RELY ON MOST TO GET YOUR CHILDREN TO DO WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO AND NOT TO DO WHAT YOU DON'T WANT THEM TO?

We explain everything and explain what's good and what's not good and we tell them, we preface, this is good and go on to explain why, and he can make a decision as to whether he is going to go along with it or not and then we will explain and try to reinforce our ideas.

WHY IS EXPLAINING IMPORTANT?

So they will know themselves what is right and what is wrong.

Level 3: Subjective-individualistic Parental Conceptions: Addressing Causes - At Level 3, the parent reasons that behavior has a cause, and that in order to change behavior, its cause, rather than its manifestation, must be addressed.

The "why" the parent focuses on at Level 3 is not just the parent's why, but also the child's why. At this level, the parent appeals to the effect of the child's action on others, not just the rightness or wrongness of an act.

LET'S GET BACK TO THE SUBJECT OF DISCIPLINE. WHAT DO YOU FEEL IS THE BEST WAY TO GET A CHILD TO MIND YOU?

Talking.

WHY IS THAT THE BEST WAY?

Because first of all, you ask questions and you find out why they did it and they tell you I broke it because you weren't paying any attention to me. So you find out, what attention did you want me to pay, I was busy too. After I finish this, then we will sit down and we will have this big long talk about anything you want to talk about, play any game you want to. Meanwhile I am finding out, like, if it is just I felt like breaking it, okay, I just felt like hitting you right now, so how about if I do that. No? Why not? Because if you hit me it will hurt. You hurt me by breaking my vase. I'll handle it like that.

Level 4: Analytic Parental Conceptions: Responding to needs to allow for growth - The child is conceptualized developmentally and certain physical and emotional needs and capabilities must be addressed when they are developmentally relevant in order for other kinds of growth to take place. The focus is not only on the directly underlying explanation or motivation, as in Level 3, but also on issues of the larger developmental and relationship process, in which the issue of discipline and authority is understood to be embedded. Discipline and authority are part of a continually developing relationship process between parent and child which has deeper and more superficial levels.

WHAT DO YOU DO TO GET STEVEN TO MIND YOU?

It depends on Steven. What he seems to be asking for at different times in his life. Right now, he's been testing me a lot. He seems to be asking for controls.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

Children test you to see how much they can get, how much freedom they can get, and to know their boundaries. Yet it is a pull both ways. Steven is trying to test me, plus he wants my comfort and attention and concern. I think if I do control him, he knows I am concerned. Deep down inside he knows that it is for his own good. He can still want something and know that it is dangerous, and be grateful at some level to a person for telling them it is for their own good not to do that.

An analysis of individual interviews shows that parents' thinking tends to be organized at one level across the issues. In other words, parents who tend to conceptualize their children's subjective experience and motivation from a "conventional" perspective, also tend to think about other issues from the same perspective. A cross-sectional analysis of interviews of children at different ages shows parental awareness levels to be age related, suggesting that parental conceptions may form a developmental sequence. This is further supported by the finding that higher parental awareness levels in adults is associated with greater years of parental experience.

In order in a preliminary way to investigate the relationship between parental consciousness and parental behavior, eight families with a recent history of having abused a child were selected from the Family Development Clinic at Children's Hospital, Boston. Each parental respondent was matched individually with

a parent whose child was being seen in the Orthopedic Clinic for a comparably acute medical condition unrelated to child abuse on four attributes:

Social class (using the Hollingshead two-factor index of social position)

Ethnic status

Number of children

Age of the oldest child.

In seven of the eight matched pairs, the abusive parents scored lower on the Measure of Parental Awareness than their matched counterparts. A t-test for correlated observations indicates that the difference between the two groups is highly significant ($t = 5.20$, $p < .01$, two-tailed). In four of the eight pairs, however, the abusive parents gave at some point in the interview a response as high on the measure as the comparison parent.

These data suggest that the developmental level at which a person organizes his or her awareness of the child and the parental role bears a relationship to parental behavior. They further suggest that some abusive parents are capable of more mature concepts of children and child rearing but fail to express them consistently in the interview.

In order to explore this possibility, a stratified subsample of the five abusive parents with scores lower than level two was compared with all ten parents with such scores from the original group of 55. Statistically significant differences were found ($p < .10$). Two of the five abusive parents achieved responses at level three, where of the original reference group only 2 of the 10 exceeded scores of two. This finding of scatter implies that in contrast with low scoring parents who do not have a clinical history of child abuse, for some abusive parents the capacity for understanding may be damped by other than cognitive factors.

Of special interest in the current literature on child abuse is the high prevalence of social and environmental stresses in the case groups of controlled

studies.[15,16] These studies have already led to a major reformulation of child abuse, focusing away from the psychopathologic etiologies posited in the early clinical literature toward a more sociologic conception of cause, prevention, and cure.

With a view to defining those life circumstances which might mitigate parental reasoning as well as to stress the family, the clinical records were reviewed in detail, and the demographic attributes of each family were more explicitly characterized and compared.

Notwithstanding the precise match on social class developed from occupation and education, a surprising disparity in disposable income was identified. The average income for the child abuse sample is strikingly lower than the control group ($t_{14} = 3.40$, $p < .005$). Somewhat less dramatic was the comparison between the incomes of the low-scoring abusive parents and the low-scoring parents in the reference group. Yet even here the disparity, on the order of two to one, is significant ($t_{(16)} = 1.85$, $p < .10$).

Low income and the exigencies it imposes may, then, interfere with a parent's ability to reason consistently at higher levels. To put it another way, parental survival may take priority over acknowledgement of the child's needs.

On the other hand, many of the higher scoring parents in the original reference group were severely impoverished, and no association was found there between low income and low Parental Awareness score.

The clinical records of the abused children gave additional support for the hypothesis that stress on the parent may affect both reasoning and child care. Consistent with previous studies of child abuse, there was an unusual prevalence of congenital handicaps and intercurrent illnesses for these children, who are surely more difficult to care for and, perhaps, to conceive as human beings with needs and rights of their own.[17]

Social isolation is another familiar distinguishing feature of this child abuse sample, and here in comparison with the matched controls and with the low scoring parents from the reference group is found a clue to what strengthens or protects families in the face of low levels of awareness. Comparing the families on number of adults in the home gave these findings: four of the eight abusive parents lived alone with their children, and within the abuse group, three of the five parents with the lowest parental awareness scores were alone. In contrast, eight of the ten parents in the low scoring reference group were married and living with their spouses. Indeed, a higher proportion of these parents were together than among higher scoring parents from the reference group. It may be that the additional adult enables a parent with few conceptual resources to cope more adequately, as well as to buffer the stresses of raising children.

Implication for Program and Policy

Developmental analysis identifies sources of parental competence and strength and deepens our understanding of serious trouble in the parent-child relationship. As the theory base for the prevention and treatment of child abuse broadens to include the cognitive structure of the parental role, new avenues of intervention, analagous to those offered to enhance children's moral growth and social reasoning, will be found. With this work, our study suggests, shall have to continue efforts to help individual parents and all families in creative and flexible ways, attending specifically to their economic and social well-being, as well as to their concepts of parents' roles and children's needs.

Because parenting is a complex process with many interacting aspects, perhaps it is most helpful to think of structural-developmental intervention within a broader framework which includes three interacting aspects of parenting: parental consciousness; personal, emotional, and environmental realities; and parental

practices. A more precise understanding at some future time of the different components of the parent-child relationship and of how the different aspects of family functioning may interact to produce patterns or styles of functioning under various conditions would hopefully lead to more sensitive, comprehensive, and effective interventions when families have problems. Intervention might be directed toward any or all of the three aspects.

Structural intervention would attempt to facilitate in the parent more mature conceptions of the child's personhood, the parent-child relationship, and the parental role. For example, with families where opportunities for positive interpersonal interaction are limited or handicapped, providing or encouraging experiences outside and/or inside the family context which allow and encourage the sharing of feelings, ideas, and perspectives might be an important aspect of intervention, perhaps as a supplement to other interventions directed toward environmental amelioration, emotional adjustment, or better parenting practices. A second structural approach would be parent group intervention which focusses on understanding of the child and child rearing issues through group discussion about hypothetical and personal dilemmas. Such an intervention would also provide a laboratory to observe the natural use and the development of parental reasoning.

Facilitative intervention would address conditions which inhibit the expression in practice of a parent's most adequate level of parental awareness. Intervention might include legal help, medical care, psychotherapy, help with housing, employment, finances, parental support groups, and parent education.

Focussing on the personal and/or environmental stresses which inhibit the expression of an individual's most mature understanding of his child would acknowledge that there are various styles of parental caring and would respect cultural differences. The emphasis would be to identify and intervene

against obstacles to optimal functioning for the particular parent.

Care-taking intervention would address parental practices. Intervention could seek to improve home safety, and parental management of the physical, cognitive and emotional needs and demands of the developing child.

Parent educators, social case workers, and visiting nurses at present address themselves to issues ofparental management and child care, as well as, in many cases, to certain environmental and personal realities.

The value of the structural approach to clinical practice would not be to provide an alternative explanation for understanding parental functioning, but rather, to supplement sociological and psychological approaches and insights in order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the origins and aspects of parenting, and to offer new insights into the formation of the enduring parent-child relationship.

References:

1. Newberger, C.M.: Parental Conceptions of Children and Childrearing: A Structural-Developmental Analysis. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1977.

2. Newberger, E.H., et al.: Pediatric Social Illness: Toward an etiologic classification. Pediatrics 50:178-185, 1977.

3. Morse, A.E., Hyde, J.N., Newberger, E.H., and Reed, R.B.: Environmental Correlates of Pediatric Social Illness: Preventive implications of an advocacy approach. Am. J. Pub. Health 67:612-615, 1977.

4. Selman, R.L.: Taking Another's Perspective: Role-taking development in early childhood. Child Development 42:1721-1734, 1971.

5. Piaget, J.: The Moral Judgement of the Child. New York, Harcourt Brace, 1950. (Originally published 1952.)

6. Kohlberg, L.: Stage and Sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. In D. Goslin, ed., Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research. New York, Rand McNally, 1969, pp. 347-480.

7. Zigler, E.: Controlling Child Abuse in America: An effort doomed to failure? In R. Bourne and E. Newberger, eds., Critical Perspectives on Child Abuse. Lexington, MA, Lexington Books, 1979, pp. 171-213.

8. Gelles, R.: Child Abuse as Psychopathology: A sociological critique and reformulation. Am. J. Orthopsychiatry 41:611-621, 1973.

9. Nurse, S.: Familial Patterns of Parents Who Abuse Their Children. Smith College Studies in Social Work 35:11-25, 1964.

10. Steele, B.F., and Pollock, C.B.: A Psychiatric Study of Parents Who Abuse Infants and Small Children. In Helfer, R.E., and Kempe, C. H., eds., The Battered Child, 2nd ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974, pp. 80-133.

11. Piaget, J.: The Origins of Intelligence in Children. New York, W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1963.

12. Furth, A.: Young Children's Understanding of Society. In H. McGurk, ed., Social Development. Amsterdam, North Holland Publishing Company, 1977.

13. Bigelow, B.: Children's Friendship Expectations: A cognitive-developmental study. Child Development 48:246-253, 1977.

14. Selman, R., Jaquette, D., and Lavin, D.: Interpersonal Awareness in Children: Toward an integration of developmental and clinical child psychology. Am. J. Orthopsychiatry 47:264-274, 1977.

15. Spinetta, J. and Rigler, D.: The Child Abusing Parent: A psychological review. Psychological Bulletin 77:296-304, 1972.

16. Garbarino, J.: A Preliminary Study of Some Ecological Correlates of Child Abuse: The impact of socioeconomic stress on mothers. Child Development 47:178-185, 1976.

17. Stern, L.: Prematurity as a Factor in Child Abuse. Hospital Practice 8:117-123, 1973.